

Lunu Dehi: a Friendly Zest



Lunu Dehi, ready to eat

A little taste is all you will ever need. From that moment on, the mere mention of the name will surely titillate the taste buds. A whiff of it and you must surrender to its robust tang. A smidgen of good ol' Lunu Dehi is a little something extra that can make you sit up for an otherwise boring meal.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Indika De Silva

Lunu Dehi, as is popularly known, is an integral part of Sri Lankan cuisine and even culture. It is a method to preserve the excess of mature lime harvested during the seasons. Back in the day the lime thus preserved was a salvation during a scarcity as they can also be incorporated into certain dishes that need it. While the benefits of lime are many and is an indispensable ingredient in Sri Lankan cuisine, lime pickle or Lunu Dehi, a preparation on its own, is believed to have beneficial effects on the spleen. Even today some households continue the practice of adding a little sliver of Lunu Dehi to preparations such as pol sambol, which can revolutionise the dish. An indisputable favourite amongst Sri Lankan palates, even the smallest portion of the pickle can salvage a bland meal. Thus it is often made, not simply for the purpose of preserving an excess but for the distinct flavour that it adds to a meal, earning its reputation as a rice puller. However, its potency is such that plunging a spoonful of pickle alone into one's mouth is not for the faint of heart.

The limes used for Lunu Dehi are those that have turned yellow from ripening. The other main ingredient, an excess of salt crystals that the limes are stuffed with, act as the preservative. The raw lime taste is avoided by prolonged drying in the sun ideally till its moisture content is removed and the core of the limes acquire a white colouration. While methods of preparation can vary, along with ingredients used and their quantities, drying in the sun is a vital step. A bottle of Lunu Dehi can last as long as five years, the longer, the tastier!

The repeated drying in the sun allows for the limes to marinade in salt. The vinegar, which also preserves the limes gives the pickle the desired moisture as well. Methods of preparation may differ where, instead of chilli powder, chilli flakes maybe added and other spices such as cloves and cardamom as well. A sure hand may either add quantities of ingredients either generously or with restraint, for the preferred and desired final taste.

There is also a method of preparing 'instant' Lunu Dehi, which involves boiling punctured limes in salt water, vinegar, pepper corns, lime juice and other spices if desired. After boiling, the swollen limes can be separated from the mix and packed into bottles and consumed on the same day.

Lime to Lunu Dehi

(For approx 10 limes)

- 1. Choose unblemished, round and yellow limes and make two intersecting incisions at one end**
- 2. Open out the lime and stuff them with copious amounts of salt crystals**
- 3. Place the stuffed limes in a wide mouthed shallow pot**
- 4. Take several limes (3-4) and squeeze out the juice into a separate pot containing a dash of salt crystals**
- 5. Place both pots out in the sun to dry. The lime juice may only require two cycles of drying after which, store in a cool dry place after sealing**
- 6. Dry the salted limes till the skins turn a light brown - longer the duration of drying, the better**
- 7. Pack the dried limes in a large jar or sealable bottle**
- 8. Add a teaspoon of chilli powder, a teaspoon of kochchi miris (chillies), crushed pepper corns (5-6) and a teaspoon of sugar to the bottle. Scrape out the sun dried lime juice from the pot and add to the bottle as well**
- 9. Pour vinegar into the contents till all the limes are immersed and shake**

till all the ingredients are mixed well

10. Seal the bottle and let it sit in a cool dry place undisturbed. The picture depicts the freshly prepared lime juice and a two year old bottle of Lunu Dehi. The older it is, the tastier!

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